

[Author Karen Armstrong on Religious 'Transformation': NPR](#)

Karen Armstrong's most recent book is THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION: THE BEGINNING OF OUR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

MARCH 28, 2006 10:00 AM ET - HEARD ON TALK OF THE NATION

CONAN: You borrow a term for this period in history from another writer. You call it the **Axial Age from about 900 to 200 B.C.**, and the great transformation you describe **emerges in different places but in response, in a way, to very similar challenges.**

Ms. ARMSTRONG: Yes, the, this **new kind of spirituality was a revolution in consciousness.** There was, there'd been nothing similar until our own scientific revolution... which completely transformed again our way of looking at the world.

And in **China, in Israel, in the Middle East, and in India and in Greece**, the element that they had in common was an **increase in violence. ...the catalysts for this major religious change was a revulsion from that violence, a turning away from that violence, in the course of which, as people began to look for the causes of violence and hatred and greed in the human psyche**, they began to discover the internal world and began discipline practices of introspection.

CONAN: At what point does a set of beliefs emerge into a religion?

Ms. ARMSTRONG: **None of these major sages were at all interested in belief or doctrine or metaphysics.** In fact, they regarded this kind of thinking as a distraction from the religious quest. **Religion was about behaving in a way that changed you at a profound level, that emptied you of your egotism.** ...Until this time, most religion had been essentially ritualistic in character, sort of magical... **People felt that by dethroning yourself from the center of your world and putting another there, you achieved transcendence.**

And it was **also important that you did not confine your love or your compassion to your own group**, your own nation, your own people, congenial people.

And the word love... was a legal term used in treaties that meant that you had to give people practical support.

Jesus also said love your enemies. That is, put your concern where you have no hope of getting anything back really. You're not in it just for a selfish reason. It's about emptying yourself of yourself, of greed and ego.

People came to the idea of compassion and empathy not because it sounded edifying, but because they found that it did bring them to a state of peace and tranquility in the midst of suffering and brought them into contact with what we call God. And it's something that I think you have to **put into practice in order to test it out**, as it were.

And, indeed people like the Buddhists said, don't take my word for this. Never take anything on faith. Never take anything secondhand. Never accept an authoritarian figure telling you, you must love one another. **Test my teachings against your own experience and if they don't work for you, if they don't bring you to Nirvana, then go to another teacher**, that's just fine.

these are universal values, I think, because it's been found that **this is what works for human beings**.

...we tend to sort of have a **great tendency to be positive in our society**. Look on the bright side, be positive. But in fact the Axial Age, it states, look at things as they are, life is full of sorrow. **Life is full of mortality and sickness and old age and, you know, nothing is ever quite satisfactory. Accept it and then you can have compassion, feel your own pain, because if you don't feel your own pain, it's very easy to dismiss the pain of others.**

...in our world, this is a, we should see **when we are deluged with images of suffering** on our television screen every night. **We should allow this to break our hearts because it is a spiritual opportunity**. The Axial Age sages would say that **by letting the suffering into your life, letting it smash down our defensive barricades, we can learn a new empathy, a new sense of going beyond ourselves.**

...what the Axial sages were saying, now **take that family bond and enlarge it**, so that you don't, you learn how to feel altruistic towards your immediate family. And **then you expand it to everybody on the planet**. That was their ambitious goal in the hope of creating a new more compassionate humanity, by bent of hard work. This wasn't grace being beamed down supernaturally from on high.

Now, I think this is no longer just a nice option now, I think it's essential. We are now not -- **we've got a cult of individualism in our society**. We're still highly me, me, me individuals. But **we're also drawn together as the human race, electronically, politically, globally**. We live in a global village.

...one of the great things that the prophets did, the prophets of Israel, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, they said don't just whine about what the bad guys are doing or don't just whine about what Assyria is doing, **look to your own behavior, begin with self-criticism**. Because Yahweh is using Assyria to punish you, the **god is the god of the whole world**.

...it's a mistake to associate religion solely with theism, with gods, and with the supernatural. That's a very Western way of looking at things.

...in Britain and in Europe generally, where religion is on the decline, people can be compassionate and altruistic without believing in a god. And forms of secular humanism, I think, can be just as inspiring, provided it's not a weary, lazy, let's get rid of religion kind of atheism.

...people are trying to find new ways of being religious. One of these new ways of being religious is the fundamentalist way, the militant way. But that's only one way, **there are all kinds of other sort of forms of religiosity, many pluralistic, many looking at how other, looking with admiration and respect at other traditions while remaining within their own but having their vision enhanced.**

That is very much on the uprise in this country. So, I think, who knows what will happen in the future. But **I think we are heading for a new way of looking at religion in new ways.** That's nothing new because **we always have to revise our traditions and make them speak to our own personal and unique circumstances.**

Not all religion is good. You can have bad religion as you have bad cooking and bad art. And you can -- so, **a lot of people don't want to be compassionate, they want to be right and so in many of the world religions, people have erected secondary goals... to shield them from this demand to get rid of ego and pour yourself out in love for others.**

...a lot of modernity was quite hostile to religion. There was this tendency to decry it and to promote reason at all costs. I think part of the Post-Modern world is returning again to this. And **there is a return to religion, but it's got to be intelligent.** Just rationality, science can't answer all our questions. It can't answer our emotional needs, our yearning for meaning, and pattern, or, you know, that kind of, what is the ultimate meaning of life?

Freud was the great philosopher. Freud who was very bitterly against religion. I think more and more people are coming around to Jung, who had a strong place in his scheme of things for the religious life.

But, a **religious life that is changed and informed by some of the best insights of modernity.** And this has got to be worked at. We sometimes forget that **we've got to work at religion as we work at science.**

...some sciences are introducing a new kind of religious discourse, which like the mystics, pit you against the dark world of uncreated reality. Which show that you can't talk about creation in a simplistic way. It shows that we're up against huge imponderable mysteries and that **the more we think we learn about the world, the more we learn we don't know.**

That's part of the human experience, and it's **one of the reasons why we have always had religions to hold us in that attitude of awe and wonder** and remind us that we are not entirely the masters of our fate.

[The Axial Age: 5 Fast Facts | Britannica](#)

[The Axial Age – Man Becomes a Philosopher - Think Research Expose](#)